

Book Review

Dewey in China: To Teach and To Learn

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Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *Dewey in China: To Teach and To Learn*. Albany: The State University of New York, 2007. v + 152 pp. ISBN 978-0-7914-7203-5. \$17.95 (Pbk).

Interest in Dewey's visit to China from May 1919 to July 1921 has grown in the last decade. Professor Wang's book is among the most important contributions to this effort to uncover Dewey's experience in China. The great merit of her book is the detailed empirical evidence she provides about Dewey's lectures, meetings, and travels as well as the people he met there and contemporary reactions to his visit. The subtitle of her book, "To Teach and To Learn" sums up well her conclusions on the impact that Dewey had on China and, equally important, what Dewey learned from the Chinese.

She divides her study into six parts: Dewey and the May 4th Movement, Dewey as teacher, Dewey's reception in China, Dewey as learner, China's impact on Dewey's social and political philosophy, and a final set of suggestions for future research. Her major conclusion is that, despite its difficulties, Dewey's sojourn in China marked an important turning point in his evolving sense of what philosophy should do. Dewey landed in China at the height of the May 4th Movement, which began as a student-led protest sparked by the treatment of China at the Versailles Peace Conference, but quickly spread to become a vast modernization movement to be carried out through social and intellectual means. In the end, the movement was at best only a partial success, but it did give Dewey a sense of the latent vitality in China's youth and especially the power of culture to effect radical social change.

As a teacher Dewey labored under a serious handicap: He was without firsthand experience of Chinese culture. While he tried to make up for this by

reading English-language newspapers and taking courses in Chinese, he was left with his own direct encounter with this ancient, varied, sprawling, and richly layered culture. His talent as an observer became obvious as his trip progressed and he gained a better handle on what he experienced in this vast and novel landscape. His inability to speak Chinese left him at the mercy of his interpreters who—especially in the case of Hu Shih, his primary interlocutor—were not reluctant to shape Dewey's lectures and remarks to bolster their own positions on political, social, and cultural affairs. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to indicate that Dewey's primary philosophical message got through: that the scientific method of experimentation had broken open old and tired philosophical methodologies. He was also able to yoke this idea with ever-deepening expositions of democracy as the best form of human self-ordering. So successful was his effort to clarify, deepen, and adapt this double message that he was called "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy."

Dewey was not entirely at ease with the way his message was revised and even co-opted by various Chinese intellectuals to bolster their own particular political and social agendas. Nevertheless, it can safely be said that Dewey's time in China served to introduce a new way of thinking and looking at political authority, economic growth, and cultural norms. At a time when China was crying out for new ways to "modernize" its culture, Dewey's extensive lecturing and intensive encounters with leading Chinese intellectuals and future political leaders laid a foundation that can still be felt in recent protests against autocratic Communist institutions.

Dewey did more than introduce Chinese students and academics to experimentation as a way of thinking and developing new ways of life. Nor were his lectures on democracy his single contribution to China's cultural worldview. Dewey, as Professor Wang points out, also learned much from his Chinese sojourn. He was commissioned by the *New Republic* to write reports and observations on what he encountered. These reports back home were among the first descriptions Americans had of what at the time continued to be called "the mysterious Orient." But as important as this contribution was, the transformation brought about in Dewey's social and political philosophy is even more significant. As Professor Wang puts it: "My central contention is that his encounter with China reinforced his belief in the essential value of community life for democracy" (p.106). Prior to his visit, Dewey's writings emphasized public institutions as the way forward to a more flourishing democratic life. He soon saw that trusting politicians to keep their word and to have the commitment to ideals required to bring about significant reform was a fool's errand. In China he found a profound commitment to communal living. This way of regarding the self as always a corporate one had the most ancient roots. It was not introduced by Mao; in fact, Mao relied on it to promote his communist revolution. Within the Chinese concept of *Ren* Dewey found the counterpoint to his own insistence on the fact that we must grow into our humanity by reason of communal experience. This change is a dramatic one. Dewey moved from his ideal

of “associated living” and democracy as shifting sets of external institutions to a much deeper understanding of democracy as a moral ideal that needed the active, shared participation of all members of society to achieve its ends, which were always evolving as new challenges had to be met.

It is the significance of human internal relations that Dewey experienced in China, and this new insight changed his point of view from that found in *Democracy and Education* to the importance of cultural community found in *The Public and Its Problems* and *Liberalism and Social Action*. Professor Wang makes a strong case that after the China experience, Dewey’s commitment to the democratic process became an expression of an ever-deepening faith rather than just another instance of experimental instrumentalism. Dewey had been transformed by China. The wall between the public and the private melted and the principle of the common good came to dominate his thinking.

Professor Wang has made an important contribution to Dewey studies. Everyone committed to understanding the growth of Dewey’s thought should read this factually accurate and philosophically sophisticated work. The hugely popular work of the late Richard Rorty turned many American philosophers in the direction of what has come to be called Neopragmatism. Rorty argued for a rereading of Dewey that converted him into a postmodern thinker. Dewey’s insistence on the unity of thought and action disappeared and was replaced by an image of philosophy as a conversation that was edifying but not effective in terms of its power to bring about social and cultural change. Rorty, contrary to all that Dewey taught, claimed that the division between the public and the private was not only insurmountable but also to be respected and defended. One wag’s remark that Rorty (and by extension his fellow neopragmatists) kidnapped Dewey aptly summarizes this inverted pragmatism. The authority of Professor Wang’s empirical research, the eloquence of her arguments, and her pioneering judgment on the mutual interaction between Dewey and China is a much needed corrective to what has recently passed as the real meaning of Dewey’s philosophy.

It is most fortunate that this book, along with works like Hall and Ames’s *The Democracy of the Dead*, Sor-hoon Tan’s *Confucian Democracy*, and Clopton and Ou’s *John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920*, have begun to address with greater nuance and depth Dewey’s experience in China. The Age of Globalization is already here and China is America’s potential rival or partner. Much depends on authentic mutual understanding. American Philosophy as the comparative study of cultural values is now beginning to lead the way towards understanding rather than hostility.

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